

District of Columbia

# Youth Permanency Convening

A Shared Commitment for Successful Youth Permanency



## A CALL TO ACTION





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For the District of Columbia Youth Permanency Convening, we adopted the California Permanency for Youth Project's definition of **permanence**:

***A process and a result that includes involvement of the youth as a participant or leader in finding a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides a safe, stable, and secure parenting relationship; love; unconditional commitment; lifelong support in the context of reunification, a legal adoption or guardianship, where possible; and the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons including brothers and sisters.***

We chose this definition because it incorporates the three formal categories of permanency—reunification, guardianship, and adoption—and also includes the idea of permanent connections. In child welfare, we maintain a balance between striving for formal permanence, which is generally a preferred outcome, and informal permanence, where an adult or adults make a moral (although not legally binding) life-long commitment to a youth. We recognize that at times, this informal or “moral” permanence is the best available option, and we must respond to this reality in supporting our youth in care.

The DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), in partnership with Freddie Mac Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation-Casey Family Services, and Kidsave, held the first annual District of Columbia Youth Permanency Convening on May 20, 2008. This convening brought together community members—family and foster caregivers, staff from CFSA and private providers, elected and appointed officials, representatives from the judicial system, advocates, and business leaders—all of whom have a stake in securing family and other lifelong connections for District youth in foster care. Most importantly, we heard from the youth themselves, who spoke passionately about their experiences in foster care, their transitions out of care with and without family and other lifelong connections, and the impact of those connections on their lives. The convening also brought to life the urgent need to improve youth permanency outcomes for the broad cross-section of the community in attendance.

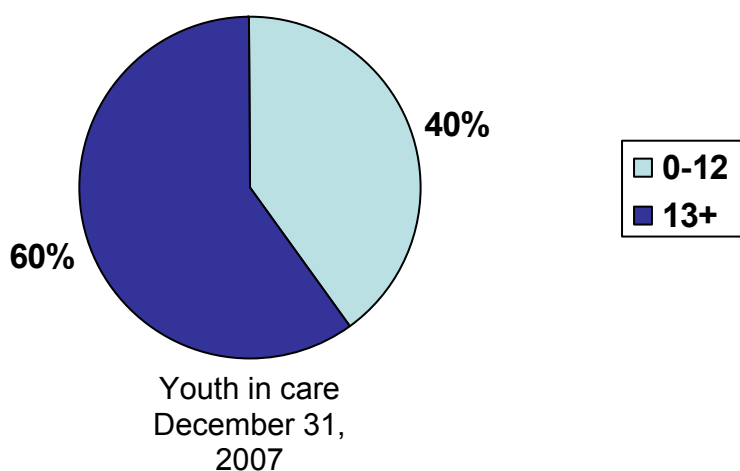
We heard hundreds of meaningful comments and recommendations for ways to improve permanency outcomes for youth. In this Call to Action, we highlight steps CFSA and other District agencies will take. We also offer the community tangible opportunities to join our efforts to ensure that all young people in care have loving, safe, permanent relationships with adults in their lives.

***“We need more foster parents; there are too many kids without homes. The conference had good information because the youth really brought out the issues.”*** Conference youth attendee

## Need for Change Around Youth Permanency in the District of Columbia

Nationwide, the majority of children in foster care are older youth. Research has shown that without better permanency options, older youth in care are far more likely to experience crime, homelessness, truancy, unemployment, poor physical and mental health, gang activity, and teen pregnancy, making it difficult for them to be productive members of their community as they become adults.<sup>1</sup> In the District of Columbia, close to half the foster care population—over 1,000 youth—is between the ages of 15 and 21. As the chart below shows, a high proportion of CFSA's population is teens and young adults, giving us a significant opportunity to have a positive impact on many lives by improving permanency outcomes for youth.

**The majority of the youth in care are teens, a total of 1319**

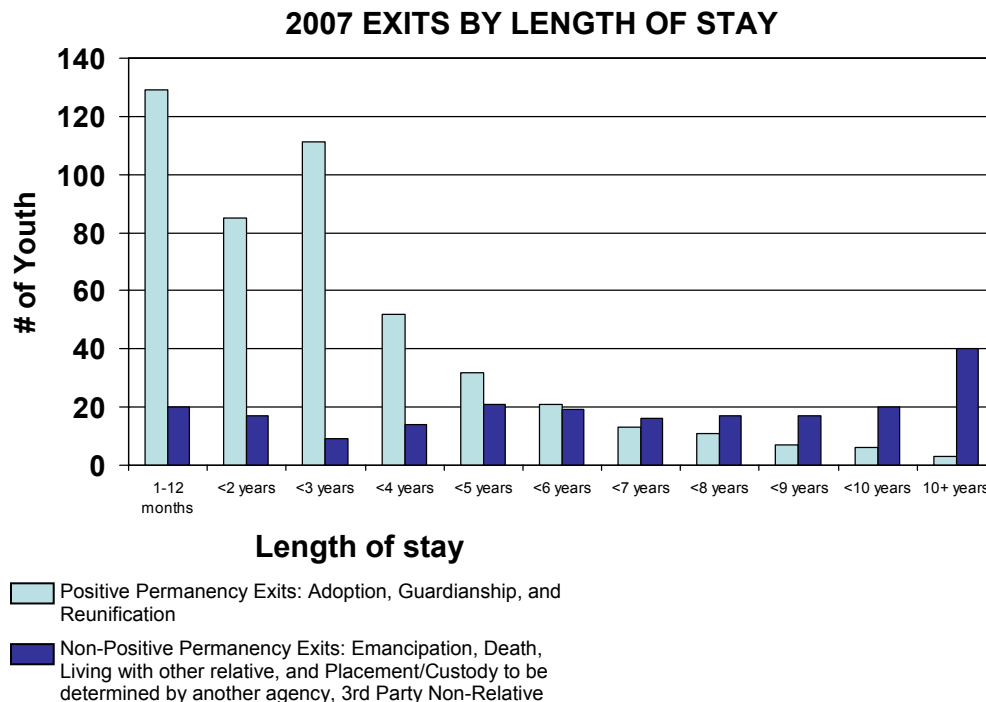


Source: PLC156

***“Don’t focus on the negative, focus on the positive and you can accomplish a lot. When you are surrounded by people that encourage you, you can do positive things.”*** Conference youth attendee

<sup>1</sup> Avery, Rosemary and Madelyn Freundlich. Deleterious Consequences of Aging Out of Foster Care. National Convening on Youth Permanence, Summary Report, 2003. (cpyp.org).

In DC, the reality is that many children who enter the child welfare system as teens, or who grow into their teen years in care, have poor permanency outcomes. After four years in care, a youth's chance for a positive permanency outcome is remote:



Source: FACES report PLC209; (Note: Length of Stay of less than 1 month excluded from graph)

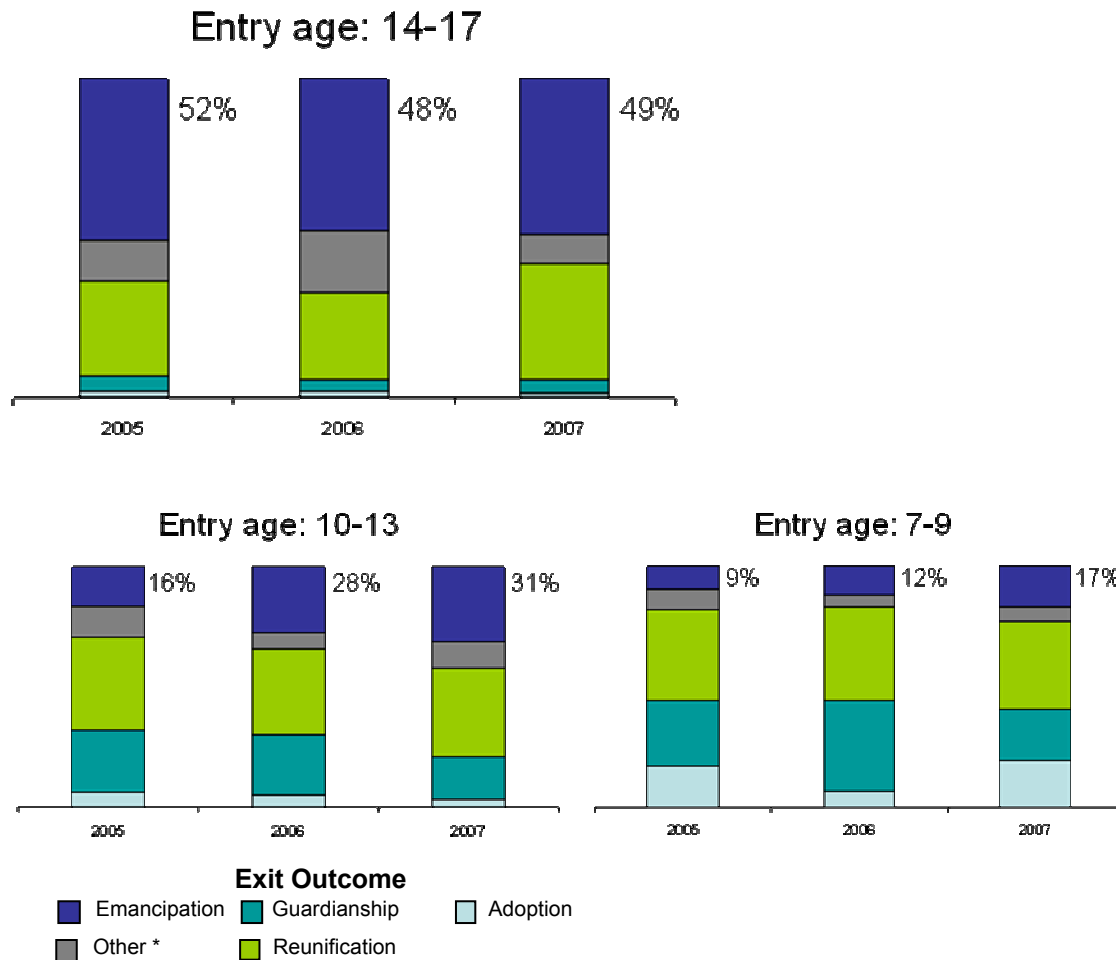
It is important to note that improvements in the DC child welfare system during the past few years have encouraged better social work practice to strengthen families and support youth. CFSA's strengths include a strong practice model, policies to maintain children in family settings, and a commitment to support youth until age 21. Despite CFSA's notable strides in meeting the needs of DC children and families, however, approximately 140 youth "age out" of care each year. These youth will not have the opportunity to make mistakes as young adults because they are thrust into a level of responsibility that is unrealistic. These are youth who need the support of caring, committed adults.

CFSA's Practice Model, adopted in 2006, prioritizes the urgency of permanence among its four principle goals:

- **Children are safe.** CFSA addresses safety and risk factors at every intervention, every plan and every contact and engages families in keeping children safe.
- **Families are strengthened.** CFSA makes every effort to engage and support birth families to prevent child placement. When placement is necessary, we make every effort to assist parents in overcoming difficulties and achieving reunification.
- **Children and teens have permanence.** CFSA is committed to ensuring that when youth age out of foster care, they have a permanent family or enduring connection to an adult committed to serving in a parental capacity and to a network of mentors and friends in the community.

- **Child and teen developmental needs are met.** CFSA prepares young people for self-sufficiency, including developing their abilities to meet their basic needs, communicate, form relationships, make decisions, solve problems and resolve conflicts.

Nevertheless, half of youth who enter care at age 14 or older remain in the system until they age out at 21. Aging out is becoming more common for youth who enter care at age 13 or younger, even among those who enter at ages 7 to 9.

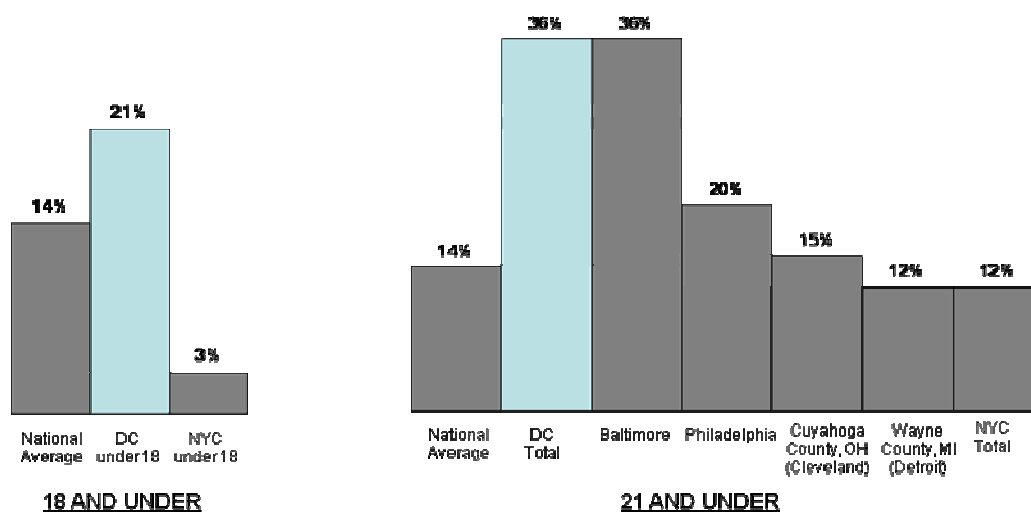


Source: FACES report PLC209MS (\*Note: Category "Other" includes: 3<sup>rd</sup> Party non-relative, Death of Child, Living with other relatives and Placement/Custody TBD by another agency)

***"There needs to be more programs for teen moms. Not group homes. It was hard for the adults to answer some of the questions, like why there are not more placement options for teen moms."*** Conference youth attendee

The District has historically focused heavily on preparing older youth for adulthood—a necessary approach—while lacking resources to sufficiently focus on identifying permanent connections. Consequently, the court has assigned the permanency goal of Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) to a disproportionately high number of youth.

**PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH APPLA BY JURISDICTION**



Source: FACES report PLC239AS; Philadelphia DHS, Cuyahoga County (OH) DCFS, Wayne County (MI) DHS, NYC ACS, MD DSS

The goal of APPLA does not lead to strong, life-long connections for youth aging out of foster care. As one youth stated at the convening, “I can’t go to APPLA for Christmas.”

## Our Commitment and Call to Action

We are committed to improving these outcomes. CFSA is making concerted efforts to improve permanency results for older youth through our Permanency Project. This effort will likely involve redefining the purpose and desired outcomes of CFSA’s Office of Youth Development and establishing specific targets to greatly reduce the use of APPLA as a goal for youth in care.

As CFSA’s Permanency Project focuses on the ways in which the child welfare system can nurture life-long connections for youth in care, Mayor Fenty has enlisted more than 20 District agencies in focusing on six city-wide goals for youth, including “children and youth live in healthy, stable, and supportive families” and “all youth make a successful transition into adulthood.”<sup>2</sup> Continuing the conversation begun at the convening, the community also has a major role to play in supporting positive permanency outcomes for youth.

Young people growing up in foster care in the District of Columbia deserve to have many people on their side, and their preparation for adulthood must involve a supportive community. In addition to positive permanence, overall well-being (i.e., stable housing, employment, education, and health and mental health services) is a critical element in successful transition from youth to adulthood. Action items contained in this report make recommendations for both permanency and well-being. Let’s seize this opportunity to partner and make a difference in the lives of District youth in care.

<sup>2</sup> See Mayor Adrian Fenty’s Six City Wide Youth Goals, [http://dme.dc.gov/dme/frames.asp?doc=/dme/lib/dme/icsic\\_outline\\_june\\_2008.pdf](http://dme.dc.gov/dme/frames.asp?doc=/dme/lib/dme/icsic_outline_june_2008.pdf).

## CFSA and District Agencies

	<b>Ongoing or implementation can be complete within twelve months</b>	<b>Implementation complete in more than twelve months</b>
<b>Listen to Youth Voices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve "teaming" in planning meetings so that youth participation is meaningful. Remember that for youth, these meetings appear to be a lot of grown ups and one kid and may be intimidating. One option is for the social worker to have a pre-planning meeting with the youth to hear from the youth. The social worker can then help the youth convey his or her goals during the planning meeting.</li> </ul>	
<b>Use APPLA Only as a Goal of Last Resort</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase placements in foster homes rather than independent living or group homes.</li> <li>Ensure that all other permanency options have been explored and exhausted before establishing a goal of APPLA.</li> <li>Require high-level Agency review and approval to establish a goal of APPLA.</li> </ul>	
<b>Make Education a Priority</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support communication between school and home, whether foster home or group home.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each school will create a resource list for the school that includes all resources that are available (such as tutoring, clubs, guidance counselors, etc) for all youth in the school. <b>Implementation is dependent on the agreement of the individual school principal.</b></li> <li>Fully implement data sharing among the schools and CFSA to facilitate the exchange of information and sharing of resources.</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure All Youth in Care Learn Independent Living Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allow youth in foster families to participate in independent living skills programs. Ensure that foster parents are teaching life skills to youth in their homes.</li> <li>Allow youth the opportunity to make mistakes while they have the safety net of CFSA, rather than preventing youth from making mistakes in the first place.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluate what "skills" are actually needed for adult life, and tailor independent living programs and curricula to those skills.</li> <li>Explore the option to provide credits to businesses that hire youth in care.</li> <li>Expand vocational training opportunities, particularly in high-paying industries such as hospitality and tourism.</li> </ul>
<b>Support the Needs of LGBTQ Youth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure that everyone who works with children and youth is trained to work with and be supportive of youth who identify as LGBTQ, as well as to understand the challenges these youth face.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mayor's Office of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Affairs may be able to provide resources and training to CFSA social workers, group home staff, and foster parents.</li> </ul>
<b>Value Family Connections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Train foster parents to work/"co-parent" with biological families.</li> <li>Prioritize sibling visits when brothers and sisters are split up.</li> <li>Devote more resources to finding families, especially paternal relatives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilize the methods used to support foster parents to support and empower birth families prior to disruption.</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure Viable Housing Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage the Department of Housing and Community Development, developers, service providers, and landlords to identify or create housing opportunities for young adults leaving care.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create or identify programs that allow youth to remain in the same apartment when they age out.</li> </ul>
<b>Think Beyond the Box about Permanency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support stability by ensuring that initial evaluations are appropriate and high quality so that a youth's first placement is the correct placement.</li> <li>Explore legislative or rules changes to eliminate benefits-related disincentives for adoption/guardianship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have on-going discussions with youth about adoption.</li> <li>Consider trial stays with families before allowing a youth to decline adoption.</li> </ul>

## Opportunities for Community Participation

(note that most opportunities will require background checks prior to participation)

	<b>Short- or medium-term commitment</b>	<b>Long-term commitment</b>
<b>Listen to Youth Voices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteer to be a respite foster home.</li> <li>Volunteer with Kidsave Weekend Miracles.</li> <li>Attend the next Youth Permanency Convening.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentor a youth in foster care.</li> <li>Be a foster parent.</li> </ul>
<b>APPLA is not a Permanency Goal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteer with Kidsave Weekend Miracles.</li> <li>Mentor a youth in foster care.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer internships or jobs to youth with APPLA “goal.”</li> <li>Be a foster parent.</li> </ul>
<b>Prioritize Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Donate a computer or college care package to CFSA to be distributed to youth in foster care.</li> <li>Sponsor a youth for participation in enrichment activities such as a sports team or dance class.</li> <li>Provide short-term housing for youth on vacation from college.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be an educational advocate for a foster youth.</li> <li>Tutor foster youth, focusing on supporting youth in high school to graduate.</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure that all Youth Learn Independent Living Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentor a youth specifically in life skills such as budgeting, cooking, or home maintenance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide paid internships for youth in foster care.</li> </ul>
<b>Support the Needs of LGBTQ Youth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide enrichment programs for youth who identify as LGBTQ.</li> <li>Create community awareness about LGBTQ issues.</li> <li>Offer programs to destigmatize and promote understanding for youth who identify as LGBTQ.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentor LGBTQ youth (in particular, LGBTQ adults).</li> <li>Host and advocate for youth who identify as LGBTQ.</li> </ul>
<b>Value Family Connections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support and mentor a family working on reunification with their child.</li> <li>Contribute resources for a kinship database that connects youth to living relatives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Host, foster, or adopt siblings in care.</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure Viable Housing Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Donate household goods to support youth in transition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rent a room to a young adult transitioning from care.</li> <li>Provide low-cost housing to youth in foster care.</li> <li>Provide housing support to birth parents as a prevention and reunification tool.</li> </ul>
<b>Think Beyond the Box about Permanency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage your workplace, religious community, or other community group in advocating for a youth in foster care to find a family.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Become a life-long mentor and friend to youth in foster care.</li> </ul>

To volunteer for any of the opportunities listed above, contact CFSA’s Office of Volunteer Services at (202) 727-7101.

***“Helping out, after coming out of the system was different. I was like a role model. It helped a lot. In the system, you feel alone, you feel by yourself. I found out I was not alone, there are a lot of us.”*** Conference youth attendee



## Conclusions

Each of the themes drawn from the DC Youth Permanency Convening—from listening to youth’s voices to thinking beyond the box about permanency—requires a commitment from all of us. In addition, CFSA is now undertaking a special focus to nurture life-long connections for older youth and young adults in care through its Permanency Project. A Steering Committee, a Stakeholder Advisory Committee, and workgroups have been formed to:

- Develop permanent connections for older youth.
- Increase and support foster, adoptive, and kinship family recruitment and retention.
- Embed the CFSA Practice Model throughout the system.
- Strengthen families to prevent teen entry into care.

But CFSA cannot create better permanency outcomes for older youth alone. As the lists of action items outline, community agencies and individuals all have a role in ensuring that the real-life results for each individual youth in foster care improve and that teens do not age out of care without a family or strong, long-lasting connections to adults who love them. Together, we need to work to reduce the length of time in care by returning youth to their families when it is safe to do so or by creating legal families through guardianship or adoption.

CFSA, in partnership with the community, is committed to achieving the tasks set forth in this Call to Action by our next local Youth Permanency Convening, scheduled for May 2009, and reaching the targets above for permanency outcomes. Every District youth in foster care deserves the love, support, and commitment of a caring adult as they strive to become productive and successful members of our community. What will you do to help?



***“The convening was really informational. It was nice to speak for ourselves ... to have someone listen to us.” Conference youth attendee***



